

Court backs ban on Gypsy fair

The high court yesterday refused to overturn an order banning a horse fair which was set to attract thousands of Gypsies to a Kent village this weekend.

The Gypsy Council and Eli Frankham, who — like his forefathers — has been going to the fair at Horsmonden all his life, had claimed that the decision to stop the event, which takes place on the village green every second Sunday of September, was an "unnecessary overreaction".

Their counsel, Jan Laiba QC, told deputy judge David Pannick in London that to the Romany community the fair was "an essential part of their remaining limited calendar of social and cultural events and its existence is integral to their traditional way of life".

But the judge, who had to give his ruling before 6pm when the order banning the fair under the 1986 Public Order Act was due to start, said Tunbridge Wells borough council and the home secretary had acted lawfully. The order lasts until Monday morning.

He said it was surprising that the Romany community had not made its challenge in April when the local parish council decided to cancel the fair — the first step in the process.

The parish council said the fair had outgrown the village, giving rise to disorder

High Court backs 'racist' ban on gypsy horse fair

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A BAN on a horse fair at Horsmonden, Kent, was upheld at the High Court in London yesterday, despite opposition from the Gypsy Council, the National Romany Rights Association and the civil rights group Liberty.

A parade of gypsy caravans will pass through the village on Sunday in protest at the decision — which was supported by Jack Straw, the Home Secretary, and which the Romany community believes is racist.

Deputy Judge David Pannick QC rejected claims that the ban imposed by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council was an "overreaction" and that the fair was "fundamental to one of the ethnic minority groups in Britain".

He said: "The borough council and the Secretary of State considered in the light of the policing concerns that the disruption to the life of the local community was of paramount concern and the need to avoid such disruption should take priority over the interests of the Romany community."

Mr Straw angered gypsies with comments in a radio interview last year, when he said:



Josie Lee leaving the High Court in London

"Many of these so-called travellers seem to think that it is perfectly OK for them to cause mayhem in an area, to go burgling, thieving, breaking into vehicles, causing all kinds of trouble, including defecating in the doorways of firms and so on, and getting away with it."

The Home Secretary said later that he had not been referring to genuine gypsies, but Romany groups remain hostile and believe the views explain Mr Straw's consent to the Horsmonden ban.

The importance of the an-

nual Kent fair, on the second Sunday in September, is a matter of dispute. Unlike the other Appleby fair in Cumbria, Horsmonden is not protected by Royal Charter, but gypsies claim it is 400 years old.

Grattan Puxon of the Gypsy Council, which is led by Josie Lee, said Horsmonden was "important to Romany heritage. People talk of their grandparents having come from Horsmonden. The fair at Horsmonden means the end of the horse breeders and horse traders."

But Neil Robins, chairman of the Horsmonden parish council, said the fair was originally a celebration of the end of the picking season. Photographs from the 1930s showed no gypsies present. "This was a picking fair with a small Romany element," he said. It has become a Romany fair, a major horse-trading event and a boot sale tagged on.

The event, which attracts about 3,000 people, has become more dangerous in recent years, he said. Three years ago there was a "knifing incident" and the following year led between two families resulted in talk of firearms, prompting an armed police block

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